



BRIEFING STATEMENT

BLM-MONTANA/DAKOTAS

MONTANA STATE OFFICE • 5001 SOUTHGATE DRIVE • BILLINGS, MONTANA 59101 • WWW.BLM.GOV/MT

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SUBJECT: GREATER SAGE-GROUSE CONSERVATION

I. SUMMARY:

Sage-grouse conservation in Montana is a multi-jurisdictional challenge due to highly fragmented land ownership patterns across sage-grouse habitat, making a collaborative approach essential. The BLM plays an important role in managing habitats and partnering with other conservation agencies and groups to apply landscape-scale strategies to sage-grouse conservation. Overall, the BLM works to maintain and enhance areas of existing habitat; conducts planning to balance resource uses and habitat protection; and engages researchers to improve our understanding of our management actions.

II. BACKGROUND:

Habitat Projects and Partnerships:

The BLM evaluates current grazing practices for opportunities to improve management practices and environmental conditions. In addition, we prioritize allotment management plans and watershed assessments in areas with priority sage-grouse habitat. On fences near leks, we are installing fence markers to reduce the chances of collisions. Additionally, we study evolving science in order to locate new fences in proper areas, remove/renovate problem fences (including removing woven wire), and change the amount and distribution of markers. Many field offices are evaluating and implementing projects to remove conifers that have expanded into sage-brush habitats. These actions will improve tens of thousands of acres of sage grouse habitat across Montana. We also work closely with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to coordinate its voluntary private land management programs with BLM management, leading to larger scale sage-grouse conservation.

The BLM also participates in three greater sage-grouse local working groups (LWGs) (Dillon, Miles City, and Glasgow) that were established under the final *Management Plan and Conservation Strategies for Sage-grouse in Montana* and are led by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. The BLM also partners with the NRCS to fund a coordinator position to enhance the function of LWGs and to find new ways to achieve greater sage-grouse conservation across ownerships.

In an effort to minimize habitat loss to wildland fire, the BLM made habitat mapping for wildland fire suppression use a top priority. Fire and fuels specialists continue to identify opportunities to reduce the threat of wildfire in areas where they can help reduce conifer encroachment and improve connectivity.

The BLM is working with the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service to ensure that proper mitigation measures are in place to protect sage-grouse and other BLM sensitive species during treatments for grasshoppers. Initial coordination efforts were successful during implementation of projects in eastern Montana during the summer of 2010 and 2011.

Planning:

The BLM is revising the resource management plans (RMPs) that cover most of the BLM-managed sage-grouse habitat in the three states. This provides an opportunity to update our approaches to sage-grouse conservation. These updated RMPs will guide on-the-ground decisions for habitat conservation and restoration through evaluating three types of areas:

Priority Habitat – areas that contain good sage-grouse habitat and other resources and that have limited disturbances. The focus is on entire landscapes, and protections will apply across all habitat.

Restoration Habitat – areas that have the potential to have good sage-grouse habitat and other resources but already have existing disturbances (energy development, fire, old fields, etc.). The emphasis within these areas will be to restore the habitat or reduce existing disturbances.

General Habitat – sage-grouse habitat outside the priority areas. Management will maintain habitat for connectivity to ensure genetic transfer and movement.

Common management guidelines for all resource uses will apply to each of these areas, not just for energy development. Results will be monitored and management adapted as applicable. Although BLM may not control enough surface or subsurface to completely maintain desired habitat conditions in some landscapes, the intent of this guidance is to provide

enough flexibility to identify and manage habitat areas unique to each field office while still meeting the overall sage-grouse habitat goals. Coordination across field offices, state agencies, and NRCS will be imperative to maintain important sage-grouse areas.

Concurrently, the BLM is engaging in the BLM National Greater Sage-Grouse Planning Strategy (<http://www.blm.gov/wo/st/en/prog/more/sagegrouse.html>) that provides the structure for transparent interagency and stakeholder collaboration on conservation and habitat restoration. This strategy will put regulatory mechanisms in place to ensure consistency and coordination of objectives across planning boundaries for long-term, range-wide sage-grouse conservation. Under the planning strategy, the BLM will review its principal, existing regulatory framework for sage-grouse conservation—the land use planning process—to determine the development and implementation of new or revised regulatory mechanisms. This national approach will dovetail with the Montana/Dakotas planning approach by adding to the framework to incorporate regionally-appropriate, science-based conservation measures into BLM land use planning efforts through coordinated, cooperative stakeholder engagement.

Research and Monitoring:

The BLM has contracted the University of Montana (UM) to conduct a population viability analysis (PVA) for the sage-grouse in southeast Montana and the Dakotas. The Buffalo Field Office (BLM WY) is participating in this effort. The PVA will address issues such as the adequacy of the proposed protected areas and what impacts or benefits will be expected by changing resource management for grazing, oil and gas development, power line development, and transportation design.

We have also cooperated with Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP), University of Montana, Forest Service Genetics Lab, World Wildlife Fund, Audubon Society, and other non-governmental organizations to develop a system to collect sage-grouse feathers from across the state and analyze them for genetic connectivity between the populations. The analysis will be conducted by students at the University of Montana. The data will be analyzed by the university and forest research staff.

The BLM is also conducting two management studies of sage-grouse to detect migration and habitat usage. The first study, in southwestern Montana, involves radio tracking 25 sage-grouse biweekly to find how and when these birds migrate to Idaho for wintering, and where potential conflicts may occur with the development of a proposed major transmission line. The BLM would like to expand this study to use satellite Geographic Positioning System collars for a better examination of habitat use. The second study, in southeastern Montana, involves radio collaring up to 100 birds and monitoring habitat usage in proposed protection areas and identified high importance areas. Most of the radio tracking will be conducted with aerial flights.

The BLM is also cooperating with the UM on a study using satellite GPS collars to track habitat usage of migratory sage-grouse populations. Cooperators include Parks Canada and World Wildlife Fund, and others are considering participation. The graduate student coordinating the project recaptured and outfitted birds with radio collars in the spring of 2010 and will continue trapping, sampling, and monitoring into 2012. Movement data is being collected and identification of movement corridors and habitat characteristics is ongoing.

Yearly lek monitoring and data sharing is a high priority for all offices. Data protocols have been developed with local FWP offices to facilitate information sharing, and the BLM coordinates inventory and monitoring efforts with FWP, industry, and non-governmental organizations.

The BLM will use an adaptive management approach that applies the best available science/information to ensure that the public lands continue to be available for the BLM's multiple uses while conserving greater sage-grouse and sagebrush habitat. These efforts are especially important in light of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's "warranted but precluded" decision for sage-grouse which leaves management of the species in the states' hands but highlights the need for conservation and continued cooperative efforts.

III. PUBLIC INTEREST:

As a good steward of the land, the BLM will continue to focus resources and efforts on conserving sagebrush and greater sage-grouse on BLM-managed lands. Environmentally responsible management actions towards energy development are intended to preserve sustainable sage-grouse populations. All these efforts will feed into future conservation and restoration opportunities under the director's Sage-Grouse Conservation and Healthy Landscapes programs.

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